

Cabbage, carrots, and the cultivation of Tibetan modernity: the history of Lubu, Hebalin and the state farms

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State development discourse in the TAR promotes vegetable agriculture as a key component of a modern, urban, and thus civilized landscape. Officials often claim, for example, that only barley grew in Tibet, until “PLA units...introduced and successfully cultivated scores of varieties of...vegetables...including tomatoes and green peppers.” In fact, Tibetans in Lhasa’s Lubu and Hebalin neighborhoods cultivated tomatoes, green peppers, and many other kinds of vegetables before 1951. However, official narratives erase their vegetable-growing skills and histories, instead attributing the introduction of vegetables to Tibet to modern science, the agents of which were the revolutionary workers of the 7–1 and 8–1 state farms.

In this paper, I examine several aspects of the histories of Lubu, Hebalin, and the 7–1 and 8–1 state farms, and use them to address “modern Tibetan history” in three ways. First, my attention to farming, ordinary workers, and memory goes against the grain of elite-centered conventions of Tibetan “history.” Second, I examine how the state farms contributed to the production of Tibetan modernity, through early workers’ sense of pride in helping to “construct” modern Tibet. Furthermore, many workers later became influential in surprising ways – one, for example, starred in *Serf*, a film about Tibet’s “feudal past” that was shown for years throughout China. Third, I address the question of ethnicity and the category “Tibetan.” Here I examine the history of Lubu and Hebalin families as Tibetanized descendants of Han and Hui soldiers; as well as ethnic tensions experienced by Tibetan women who joined the 7–1 and 8–1 state farms in the 1951–59 period.